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AUTHOR Hall, Jeanne L.
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ABSTRACT

Before considering the portrayal of values in children's dramaturgy, this paper discusses definitions of values, examines the way in which children learn values and the confusion about values that contemporary children may feel, and reviews books that deal with the role of children's literature in values education. It then identifies five categories of values--group relationships, patterns of family life, cultural contrast, positive self-image, and ethical character--that may be used in analyzing the values content of children's plays, and it discusses numerous children's plays with regard to the values they portray. The paper concludes by noting that, although children have many opportunities to view entertaining drama on television and in films and children's plays, there are grounds for concern about the quality of much of what they are viewing, and there is a need for children's plays that feature entertaining but meaningful plots carrying values without didacticism. (GW)

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Jeanne L. Hall

IN GENERAL TERMS, HOW WELL DOES CHILDREN'S DRAMATURGY REFLECT THE VALUES DEEMED IMPORTANT BY SOCIETY?

In 1956, a special committee of the Children's Theatre Conference reported on the objectives resulting from viewing a Children's Theatre play. Among the four desirable results was "The understanding and appreciation of life values drawn from human experience as portrayed on the stage." Other writings of that period echoed similar sentiments. It is a worthy goal, but what are life values? How are they acquired? And have they changed in the last 10-20 years?

Even an agreed upon definition for values is difficult. Definitions tend to emphasize either personal, social, or democratic values. Semantic difficulties are encountered according to the specialization--psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, or education. Good's Dictionary of Education defines a value as "any characteristic deemed important because of psychological, social, moral, or aesthetic considerations."[1] For this report I will use the following: "The term values will be considered to mean qualities of things or experiences that have positive or negative attractiveness. Values are not concrete goals or actions or goal-objects, but rather the criteria by which the goals are chosen. Values are directive factors in human behavior, and desirable values are usually considered those traits and attitudes which bring about socially accepted behavior in this culture.

It is the latter part of the definition which poses the problem of identifying values appropriate for today's youth. From the time I first studied values in plays--the early 1960's until now--many changes have occured. There is no longer an unchallenged values system. Max Lerner in Values in Education says, "The young are swimming in a confused sea of values, by the very fact of being exposed to family and peer group interactions, to books, to press and film and TV. They are constantly battered by storms of values of which they are

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unaware."[2] The anti-war, anti-draft activisms, civil rights movement, generational struggle, rejection of authority and institutions, political skepticism, diverse life styles, rejection of sexual values and the traditional male-female roles, the changed work ethos--all these and more are challenges that cause people of all ages to scrutinize and re-evaluate their goals and the criteria upon which they are based. As adults change, so do children, families, peers, and communities.

How does a child learn his values? At first such learning is random--at home, school, the playground or in the street. Gradually, he begins to identify with particular models in the values situation--a parent, teacher, friend, authority figure, a media figure. The identification is likely (but not necessarily) stronger with a primary agent--father, sister, close friend, rather than a secondary one(political or media). The erosion of heroism in public life and the absentee father--or mother--has produced an identification model vacuum. The media has provided models. "If you could be any famous person living in the world today, who would you like to be?" This was the question put to 1000 school children by a national magazine (reported in the San Francisco Chronicle, Spring, 1977).[3] The top ten of the girls' choices were Farrah Fawcett-Majors, Marie Osmond, Lindsay Wagner, Nadia Comaneci, Toni Tennille, Olivia Newton-John, Barbra Streisand, Cher, Barbara Walters, and Kate Jackson. The boys chose: Lee Majors, Jimmy Carter, John Wayne, Elvis Presley, Gerald Ford, "The Fonz", Evel Knievel, O.J. Simpson, Fran Tarkenton, and Elton John. Obviously, these media models are the result of constant, consistent or concentrated exposure. Books or live plays provide only infrequent opportunities for hero figures to emulate, but the obligation for providing such models for values nevertheless is important.

Opportunities for children today to encounter, confront, and choose between values occur in fragmented situations and between what is probably a confusing array of models.

They have more choices. New means of mass communication and increased mobility of people results in more children being exposed to more inconsistencies. The child sees or reads ads but is advised not to believe everything he is told or observes. He hears repetitive statements pledging dedication to peace and all around him are signs of war. He is told to cooperate but also to look out for himself or nobody else will. Women and men are equal but he is aware of discrimination. He learns verbalisms about religion, but is told that he should not let religion interfere with making money. He is told that education helps enrich life, knowledge is power, and skill should be respected, but he is also told that it is not what you know but who you know that counts. Adults are expected to work, but he is aware of the welfare system. Commodities are symbols of status, but there are many poor people. His classroom is integrated, but he knows little of the cultural differences and backgrounds of his peers. The role of parents has changed and one child out of six lives in a single parent family. One-half of the mothers are in the labor force. The extended family is less usual. Mobile parents frequently do not really know neighbors or their standards. But still there is the assumption on the part of grown-ups that adult beliefs (and values) should persevere unmodified, that children should have the beliefs of their elders. It is frustrating for both child and parent when beliefs are different. Parents say one thing, peers another, successful people demonstrate something else. A child is less provincial and more sophisticated than in the past, but the act of choosing a values system is more difficult.

As a child begins to make choices, they are at first tentative and probably based on authority. As he probes and explores in the enlarging environment, he is checking and rechecking his values. They work for him or they do not. Not all this exploration need be actual--vicarious situations also assist him in the validation of his guides to behavior and his goals. What he sees, reads, or hears about--all influence what he will become. He cannot physically experience everything he needs to know. The vicarious may be the strongest

basis for the validation of his values. It is at this point in the whole process of forming a values system where the drama of Children's Theatre may be most effective. When a play offers a child the opportunity to observe a character or a situation in which a choice is made between conflicting values in actions or in dialogue (and when these situations are near enough to reality for personal identification) he experiences yet another way of checking his system--his guides to behavior. This is not to say that one play will have an indelible influence upon a child. It is impossible to isolate the variable in one event for it becomes so much a part of the totality of experience that it becomes lost. But because it is not identifiable does not relieve us in Children's Theatre of the responsibility for providing it.

People concerned with the whole field of education and children's literature have long been aware of the potential influence of books to inculcate values, influence attitudes, and affect the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and moral development of youth. Reading Ladders for Human Relations, published by the American Council on Education is in its 5th edition. The committee responsible for this annotated bibliography of children's literature feel strongly that insights gained from reading will give children a greater sense of security as they face a sometimes threatening world.[4] They have divided the book into sections treating: Creating a positive self image; Living with others; Appreciating different cultures; and Coping with change.

Two recent books, both published in 1976, are concerned with children's literature for values education. The book, Human--and Anti-human--Values in Children's Books, states: "Books do carry a message--a moral, a value or set of values--and they mold minds".[5] The authors believe that books in the past carried a values system which was very white, very contemptuous of females (except in traditional roles) and were oriented to the needs of the upper classes. Books were geared to individual achievement rather than community well being.

In our present society concepts about race and sex relationships are now the major areas of upheaval, but the materialistic life style, "old" being equated with useless, elitism (being stuck in a class), and extreme competitiveness are subject to critical scrutiny. In books, racism runs from simple omission of third world peoples to stereotypes--plus white paternalism, abuse of their language, and the necessity for minorities to win acceptance by whites. Sexism is often based on old cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity--weakness vs. toughness, passiveness vs. rugged individuality.

In the book, Children's Literature: An Issues Approach,[6] the author presents discussions, analyses, controversies, and arguments about the issues of sibling relations, divorce, death and old age, war, sex education, treatment of minorities such as the black and the Native American, and the role of the female as they are handled in children's books. She is especially critical of the stereotyping of Blacks in the books--the poor but happy-go-lucky person, or the ghetto child whose whole life is poverty and crime. In stories, whites usually have decision-making power, or minorities are considered "the problem", and solutions depend on the benevolence of a white person. Words are often loaded and dialect is frequently innappropriate. Native Americans are given a literary treatment which is distorted both in an idealized as well as a negative manner. Details should be accurate and a patronizing attitude should be avoided.

Many of the issues which are the concern of critics and writers of children's literature should be of even more concern to people involved with Children's dramaturgy. But are we concerned? Have we been systematic in isolating and promoting the plays which may be the means of attaining our objective of "understanding and appreciating life values as portrayed on the stage"? The number of plays available today seems plentiful compared to only a few years ago. But choices to meet specific needs--particularly in the area of values education--seem limited.

Of the dramaturgy published by three major publishers of children's plays, approximately 40% are fantasy (folk or fairy tales), 24 % are classics (The Pied Piper or The Prince and the Pauper) 13% could be considered historical, 10% are fairly modern realistic, 5% might be called special occasion plays (Christmas),and science fiction (space) and reviews are roughly 4% each. Obviously, if we go beyond the "goodness and badness" of the fantasy tales, our literature is lacking contemporary stories which might be useful to children for values identification.

When I first formulated a list of values for use in an analysis of popular children's plays,[7] it was not an exclusive list. Relative importance of some of these values has changed. I have narrowed and clustered the values into five categories. They are not necessarily in order of importance.

GROUP RELATIONSHIPS--with family and peers, and with others of a different age, ethnic group or socio-economic class. It is quite likely that group relationships are more important today than ever before. More people of more diverse types, living in less space and with more mobility pose problems of getting along together. As more children are members of families with two working parents or a single parent who works, child care centers will extend the number of hours per day when children are with other children of varied ages and backgrounds. Patterns must be developed for group living. Cooperation must excel over competitiveness. Qualities which encourage friendships should be given attention.

PATTERNS OF FAMILY LIFE--siblings, grandparents, growing up, customs and heritage--now and historically. Conflicts (with resolutions) should be shown as well as affection and understanding. Sex roles of fathers and mothers should be shown (as well as those of boys and girls) and should not be stereotyped. Divorce and death should not be avoided. A child may learn that family problems are not unique to him alone.

CULTURAL CONTRAST. While a play, unlike film, cannot transport a child to another country for authenticity of detail, children's theatre productions have an obligation to provide plays which will foster appreciation of cultural contrasts. Integration of ethnic minorities into schools is being followed by integration in all walks of life. Few children's plays contain any roles for individualized minority persons. Traditions (not token references) of other cultures, as well as regional cultures in our own country should be utilized. Stereotyping must be avoided, and authenticity sought. Historical plays geared to children give a sense of heritage and point out contrasting and similar values.

A POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE--recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses, growing into maturity, accepting oneself, and developing personal values. Although we live in a country which offers remarkable advantages to most of its people, and whose children lead relatively comfortable lives, a sense of personal security and self-worth is not a guarantee. Children need a feeling of dignity and self-worth before they can relate to others. They need to know how to cope with change, with conformism vs. individuality, with choices for conduct, appropriate goals, and accepting responsibility for one's own acts. Vicarious experiences may help them gauge their own self-image.

ETHICAL CHARACTER. Values related to ethics or morals--honesty, bravery, kindness, humility, etc.,abound in children's plays. Playwrights insert actions and dialogue to illustrate the goodness or badness of the generally two dimensional characters. Unless an ethical quality is related to the theme of the play, it is quite likely that the child in the audience may be oblivious to it except as a small part of the simplified characterization. If the ethical quality is strong in character, plot and theme, it may be recognized and important in the role model.

In my abbreviated evaluation of values plays I am not using any audience participation plays--simply because I am not that familiar with them. Nor do I illustrate with many of the

traditional fairy tales, for I am not sure of the importance of these plays to meet values needs for school-age children, especially with current "treatment". According to Bettelheim, (The Uses of Enchantment)[8] the fairy tale is a very personal thing--something to help the child with his innermost difficult problems. His imagination is stimulated, and the simplified situations in the tales, by implication, convey to him the advantages of "moral behavior" and help him to cope with unconscious pressures. Role models are either good or bad, and the good always wins against insurmountable odds. Personally, I believe that for very young children, these imaginative stories may be useful to familiarize them with the stories and as illustrations of right winning out over wrong. They may furnish for him broad examples of ethical character. On the other hand, they may be more useful as stories instead of plays, for a child's personal needs may be better served in the privacy of the story telling situation rather than by the more explicit presentation of the story by actors before a crowded audience of the child's peers.

As I have said before, anyone looking for illustrations of ethical character--both good and bad--can find it in the stereotyped characters of children's plays. Deception and greed (The Pied Piper), jealousy (Snow White), vanity (The Emperor's New Clothes) is punished. Correction of faults such as selfishness and pride is rewarded in "The Plain Princess". In the more contemporary play, "Appleseed", altruism and pacifism is demonstrated. Some stories prove that keeping your wits about you can save you from danger. Hard work can bring success; intelligence is more valuable than physical strength; kindness brings reward. Desirable values--didactic messages in a world of conflicting values.

Other values--those more subtly illustrated by the complexities of the plot and by the theme may be exemplified by the following:

In The Invisible People, by William Lavender, the story focuses on growing up and finally passing on one's unreal friends to a younger child. Cindy copes with change, and

the story is not dependent upon the conflict with General Grumpdump for justification.

The Rabbit Who Wanted Red Wings learned to accept himself as a rabbit--a value for children to be happy as themselves. The Lion Who Woundn't, by Clifford Wingate, failing in his heroic fantacies, decides to be what he was meant to be--the best lion in the circus. A story need not be totally realistic for values identification. A child can validate the idea of doing well what one is best suited for.

Steal Away Home, by Aurand Harris, is an excellent illustration of cultural contrasts in both time and people. The two young black boys are examples of independence, initiative and courage--excellent role models for children. Those who help the children on the road to freedom are balanced between blacks and whites--one of the few examples of roles for minorities in children's dramaturgy. There is also no stereotyping by sex--women, as well as men, help the escaped slaves. Mean to Be Free, by Joanna Kraus, is similarly important as a good values play. Indian Captive, dramatization by Gertrude Breen, is another fine, but rare, example of cultural contrasts. All children sooner or later discover that in life nothing remains static, and as changes occur we must resist, accept, or adapt. Millie Jemison not only adapted to the life of the Indians but learned to appreciate their culture. The characterization of the young girl is excellent, the treatment of the Indians is not condescending, and the Chamber Theatre style enables a child to fully identify with the characters as they reveal their thoughts and feelings. The Eskimo legend, The Ice Wolf, by Kraus, is one of the most important of contemporary plays which carry a values message. The Eskimo setting, customs and superstitions expose the child audience to an entirely different world. Anatou, the different one--a fair child among dark people--gives children an opportunity to appreciate what discrimination means. When the villagers admit that they did not kill Anatou, the wolf, but rather the young girl when they persecuted her years ago, each child in the audience identifies either with the girl or with those who tormented her. The play is not didactic, but the message is strong.

Patterns of family life, which seems like an obvious values category for children's plays, is illustrated in few of the plots. This is strange since the children who attend Children's Theatre are mostly of an age when the influence of the family is great. Younger children are especially interested in mothers, siblings, and family traditions. (Royal families are remote;and cruel parents, as in Hansel and Gretl, are hardly realistic patterns.) In the Adventures of Harlequin, by William Glennon, Harlequin's family--his mother, sister and brother--present an excellent model of family relationships--loving, teasing, understanding. His ambition to be an actor is supported by his family and his friend, Luigi. When he auditions with a roving Commedia troup who have lost an actor, he fails. His failure is a value in itself, for all people must fail at some time. One must learn to cope with failure as well as success. Encouraged by his family, he tries again and is successful. Without a clear understanding of the values in this plot, the director (and actors) may tend to over-emphasize the antics of the commedia troupe in their slap-stick routines and fail to point up the positiveness of the family-friend relationships, the inevitability of some failures, and the necessity for persistent effort. Caddie Woodlawn, written and dramatized by Carole Brink, also emphasizes family relationships. Her adventures on the Wisconsin frontier are realistic and help a child understand rural life over 100 years ago. Tomboy Caddie resists her sex role, but the play ends with indications that she will grow up to be a lovable young lady with spirit and individuality. Step on a Crack, by Susan Zeider, is a contemporary play dealing with a very contemporary problem--a step mother who is viewed by the young girl as a threat to her close relationship with her father. The girl shows all the emotions and willfullness of a frustrated teen-ager. The resolution may be unrealistic and unmotivated for this very real problem, but child viewers who have step parents will identify completely--especially as they realize they are not alone in their problem, and that problems do have solutions.

Group relationships with peers or with people of different ages or socio-economic class appear in children's plays but are seldom important in the theme. Friendships between ethnics are rare. However, in plays such as Winnie the Pooh and The Wizard of Oz, devotion to friends is readily apparent. The children in Peter Pan work together to outwit the pirates and they enjoy each other's company. This play also stresses family relationships--even Peter longs for the traditions of a family. Rarely is an older person an important character in a plot except as a stereotyped comic. In most plays there are no friendships between truly dissimilar people.

Children today are sophisticated. Thanks to film and television, they have many opportunities to view drama which apparently entertains them. But those who care are concerned with what they are viewing. This past Spring two groups, Committee on Children's Television met in San Francisco and in Los Angeles to express to TV stations their views on the needs of children which are not presently being met.[9] Among their conclusions were: children need to learn how to deal with conflict through non-violent solutions, by realizing the relationship between laws and rightness and wrongness, by understanding the relationship between rights and responsibibilities, and by weighing the consequences of their action; they need to understand the diversified lifestyles of our people and to be exposed to a multicultural heritage; and they need positive and varied role models, both peer and adult, that include the handicapped and elderly as well as cross-cultural influences. These groups (CCT) have provided input for the TV license renewal process of the television stations.

We, too, should be concerned. From reading and viewing many children's plays, it seems to me that at this time production aspects are overwhelming the dramaturgy. In most instances technical features of the plays--costumes, lighting, sound, and scenery (whether elaborate or simple and imaginative) are excellent. Acting, while often overdone or even frenetic, is adequate. What is done with the plays is frequently better than the plays

themselves. It stands to reason that if content is thin, the treatment must be "special." On the other hand, the play may contain an important theme, the plot and characters may contain values which help children understand themselves and others, but if the ideas are not sought--or identified--by the director and actors, the play may be well done and meaningless--impressive and entertaining for the moment and quickly forgotten. Playwrights and directors are both responsible for discovery. A child may be intrigued by wondering what will happen next. His attention may be held by figuring out why it is happening. He may gain understanding by learning how characters feel and think as well as act. But when they reflect on "What does it all mean?", they have made a discovery. They have learned a significant truth, identified or validated a value

The quantity of literature for Children's Theatre is growing. So, to a degree, is the quality. But as we in the field know what we want--entertaining but meaningful plots which carry values without didacticism, we will find the quality of the dramaturgy improved.

VALUES IN CHILDREN'S DRAMATURGY

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